

*MOLA Conference 2022*

## **Composer Wrangling, or: Helping Composers Think Like Musicians**

*Presentation by Alastair McKean, Head of Library Services, Sydney Symphony Orchestra*

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Good morning. My name is Alastair McKean and I'm Head of Library Services at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in Australia. It is an immense pleasure to be here at a MOLA conference for the first time since London, and I'd like to thank Nicole Jordan for asking me to come and speak. I've called this talk 'Composer Wrangling, or: Helping Composers to Think Like Musicians', and it strikes me first off that there is a weakness in this inasmuch as although of course like all of us I love and adore all of my musicians, there are times when 'thinking like a musician' is the last thing which any sane person would want to encourage of anybody. I speak as someone who has loaned the shoes off his own feet to a violin player who forgot to bring their own. One other time, the socks as well.

So I should clarify that what I mean by this is that I try get composers – and particularly young composers – to see their scores and their parts as from the perspective of the people who have to play them. Most of the composers with whom I work – and I don't know if this is the case for you, but I'd be surprised if it weren't – most of the composers with whom I work don't play a musical instrument at a very high level. Most of them don't regularly play in an orchestra of any sort. Most of them don't have a particularly sound knowledge of the standard repertoire, or of music history, or of orchestras in general. They've been – and their training has been – very focused on their own creativity and on music of the present day. And that's fine, but it means that there's a lot about orchestras that they don't instinctively understand. And that's something where we can help.

What I want to do today is talk firstly about what I do when I work with composers; secondly, some things which I find are issues that just keep coming up; thirdly, some suggestions for how to talk to composers, how to approach them in a way that's helpful and honest but that they won't find offputting. And then if you wish we can have some questions at the end or we can head off for an early lunch.

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### **1. WHAT I DO**

But if I'm going to pontificate then I think I should start by giving you an idea of my qualifications to do so. My degree is in fact in composition, and on about Day Two at the University of Sydney I realised that having grown up in Wangaratta, population 16,500, my perspective on the immortality of my music was perhaps somewhat in need of calibration. I mean, I don't like to blow my own trumpet but of all the composers in Wangaratta, I was definitely the best one ... who lived in Murdoch Road. I'm pretty sure. Alas, it turned out that in the great world this was not enough to cut the mustard. But that was actually not a bad thing because I ended up as the Librarian at the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, which

actually was more fun and I think a better outcome all round for the art of music. I think it probably would have been a better outcome for the art of music if I'd been a plumber.

The MSO has always had a very good record on contemporary music and in 2003 we introduced a project for young composers called the Cybec 21st Century Australian Composers Program, which is still going.<sup>1</sup>

The Cybec composers, or as they may have become known, the Cyborgs, in the first few years they had their parts prepared for them by a copyist, for which the program paid. But I felt very strongly that if we were taking this seriously as an educational thing, then it was important that they do their own. Most of them were pretty green, and if you just send off the score and it all magically happens then I don't think you learn anything. Certainly one of the most valuable lessons I learned as a composer was writing out parts for ensembles that I was conducting, and finding out pretty quickly that if it was even the tiniest bit unclear, that was my problem. And I wanted these composers to have that experience too. So eventually in 2007 I managed to get this changed, which meant that someone had to give them feedback. Which is what's known as making a rod for one's own back.

The first thing that I do when a score comes in – and I still do this, by the way. When I defected to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra I thought, oh well, I've done my last composer training, and then our new CEO Emma Dunch created a project called 'Fifty Fanfares' which is fifty short pieces by mostly younger composers. It's a fantastic project, we're creating some great pieces and it's getting some new music in front of audiences who normally avoid it, and I can tell you it's keeping me off the streets. Anyway, the first thing that I do is print the score and sit down with a red pen and mark everything I can find. And I mean everything. I mean if they have misspelled 'triangle' in the instrumentation list. I mean if they refer to 'F horn' rather than 'Horn in F'. I mean if there are no brackets on the left-hand side of the score. And unless it's something which the software can change globally, so you need only fix it once, I mark every example that I can see. And then I write a report. And it has approximately one million bullet points.

- bar 1. Clarinet 1 is pianissimo, clarinet 2 is piano. Should they be the same?
- bar 1. Percussion. The player will not be able to change from tamtam to marimba this quickly at this tempo.
- bar 1. Cello. Use the abbreviation 'pizz.' not 'pizzicato', and it should be in roman type not italics.

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1. I have to parenthesise here. Cybec is the name of the foundation which funds it, which was endowed by a remarkable man called Roger Riordan. Roger – God rest his soul, he died a few years ago – he invented one of the first antivirus programs and made a Scrooge McDuck-sized pile of money, which he then gave away to an enormous array of humanitarian causes. He loved getting together with his grant recipients, and I went to a function once with about, you know, a hundred people, and there was one bloke who had grown up in one of Australia's appalling refugee detention centres, Roger had put him through university, and he was off to Harvard Medical School. It put MSO into perspective. Roger really was a great man. He was a funny bloke. He didn't actually like contemporary music at all – he liked the orchestra, and he loved helping young people, and we had a very persuasive CEO – but modern music for Roger was something to be gamely endured, and he would trot up to these composers and say to them 'Now, is your piece weird, or seriously weird?' ... and the composers never quite knew how to respond.

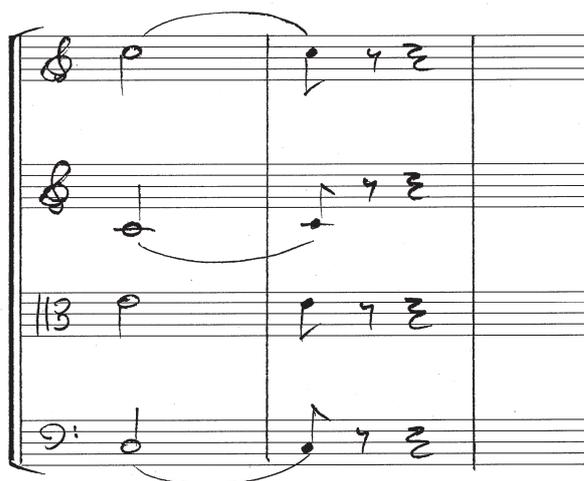
And so on and so on and so on. And here's an example of one:

(That one actually was unusually large.)

Two things I should mention. Firstly, Elaine Gould's wonderful, wonderful, wonderful book *Behind Bars* made my life a huge amount easier. If I knew something looked wrong but didn't know quite why, then rather than try and deduce a convention from looking at other scores, I could just look it up. And of course when talking to composers I could just say, look at Gould – and at Cybec we actually used to buy a copy for them – because a 700-page reference book from London has a lot more credibility than the deranged rantings of some randomly-bearded librarian.

The other thing is that I got to the point with Cybec that I was finding myself always saying a lot of the same things, so I put the most common issues in a document I call the 'cheat sheet', which I gave to composers as a pre-emptive strike. I still do this, and I keep updating it from time to time as new issues arise. I've also got a much briefer style sheet aimed at professional composers and copyists. (These are both up on the MOLA website.)

So when I'm writing these reports, the sorts of things I pick up. Firstly, ambiguities, like, clarinet 1 and 2 should obviously be the same dynamic but they're not. Or, say, something like this:



I usually take this on face value. The question isn't 'Which dynamic is correct?' but 'Should they be the same?' Maybe they shouldn't! And if I can, I offer suggestions; so if they really do want that viola note rearticulated, I say, well, in the context this is ambiguous because the others are tied, so consider a comma at the end of the bar, or a staccato on the second note or tenutos on both notes or something. The point is that the composer needs to see that it's ambiguous, and they need to understand that that can be an issue in rehearsal.

Then there's just sloppy work:



So they've dragged the crescendo too far over the barline, there's a system break, and we end up with what I call crescendo poo.



So then we explain the convention. We say, if the crescendo is aiming at the first beat of the next bar, the convention is that it stops at the barline:



and the player understands what you mean. And we say, look at Gould pages 103 to 108.

Really this is just proofreading. Even the missing tie in the viola part is likely to be a typo. And proofreading is necessary, by the way, because a score is so complex that even the most diligent composer will still have errors. The less experienced ones have really not yet grasped the level of detail they need and a 22-page memo can genuinely be very helpful in recalibrating their standards. But one thing you'll almost always see is that there's at least one broad principle of notation which the composer hasn't quite grasped. For instance we had one recently who was all over the place with slurs. They'd write this:



when they meant this,



and they'd write this



or this



whereas to be true to Gould they should have written this.



And once you start seeing they're making a particular error consistently, then it's quite efficient to go through the piece just looking for that error – just looking at the slurs. Often I find it's neater to treat these as a separate thing. So, we pick the first couple of examples in their piece which are incorrect, and we say 'this is how it should be done', and we point them at Gould, and then we give them a list of every spot where it needs to be fixed.

The other thing you pick up regularly is technical problems with the instruments, things which are either unplayable or not well notated in the way that that instrumentalist likes to see it. And we'll talk about a few common ones in a minute. I'm relying here on my expertise, which is imperfect, so I tend to be a bit careful about this. And when I don't know, but it looks dubious to me, then I'll talk to the players. So if say there's a passage in the bassoon which is written in the grey area where tenor or bass clef could apply, I'll flick it to the player and say, what would you prefer. So I'll talk about very basic things, like issues of range, but I don't talk about orchestration so much. I have some extremely broad axioms on the last page of the cheat sheet – things like 'Special effects become less special and less effective the more they are used', and 'Writing to the instrument's strengths is generally more effective'. But I wouldn't say 'this chord could be better voiced', because I'm really not qualified to do so. I guess the distinction I draw is not so much aesthetic as practical. I mean it might be a badly voiced chord but I want the players to read it effortlessly.

I must have written 70 or so of these. They're very rewarding but they're incredibly time-consuming. The other way to do it of course is to go through the score in person with the composer, and I've done this for less high-profile things like workshops with universities. But if you're sitting down and talking it through that's a lot of information for the composer to assimilate. Whereas if it's written down they can at least tick things off as they correct them.

I do from time to time wonder if some of the things I'm flagging are a bit unfair. They're not things that Brahms had to worry about. He could scrawl a crescendo going over the barline and someone else would make sure there was no crescendo poo. These days that doesn't happen, unless you're Thomas Adès. But this is one of the downsides of notation programs. The musicians are basically using your manuscript. And that means your manuscript has to be neater than Brahms' was.

So until they get picked up by Faber Music, the composer is their own engraver. And of course those are two very different skills. But really we're not trying to get them to engraving standard; we just want the pieces to be neater than they were when they were submitted. And in any case, everything I am red-penning is something that the composer needs to get right. Being across these details – that's their job. And look, sure, musicians are good at inferring what's intended, and they're very forgiving, and if you don't get the slurs strictly correct then, in a way, it doesn't matter; they'll work out what you meant.

But I also think: why not get it right? You have to put that crescendo down: why not put it in the right place? It's a discipline thing, you know. Maybe it's just me, but I don't think it's that much to ask. If you get into the habit of doing the slurs correctly then you get a neater score, and a more professional looking score, and you'll get taken more seriously. The alternative is like reading the newspaper and seeing the name of the President of the United States spelled

B-I-E-D-E-N. If you want to be the political correspondent for the Washington Post you might need to work on that. And we get back here to the lack of experience. If composers aren't regularly looking at orchestral scores, if they're not regularly playing from orchestral parts, then they're not going to pick up these conventions by osmosis.

I mean in the end I want to make the composers look as good as possible in front of the conductor and in front of the orchestra. Although the composer who gets a 22-page memo on their latest masterpiece possibly doesn't see it quite like that.

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## 2. A FEW COMMON ISSUES

Let's talk about a few common things that just keep on coming up.

### Spacing

Firstly, parts. And, specifically, spacing. I actually think the parts are the easy bit. Once the composer has fixed issues with the score, that's going to solve a lot of problems downstream. Of course we need to brief the composers on paper size, margins, that sort of thing, but I think the most important is spacing. On notation software, if you extract parts then the default settings will put enough space between systems that you can land a 747 there. Which as we know is not ideal. So the first thing is to tell the composers, the players are playing here while reading here. Which means at the line break they're playing here while reading here. So the more space between here and here, the trickier it is. So it needs to be tightly spaced vertically. Otherwise it looks like, you know, a paragraph of text which is not single spaced but quintuple-spaced. Which of these two is easier to read?

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever. It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period, as at this. Mrs.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of

The other thing about spacing is that I'm always pushing composers to get everything as close as possible to the staff. Again, the way I explain this is that the player's focus is the staff, which is where the notes are; so, the more the eye has to move away to read the information, the more territory it has to cover, the harder that is for reading. It's not helpful if, you know, you have a middle C in the treble staff and the dynamic is five ledger lines south.

One thing I always think useful is to have a notational thesaurus, by which I mean a well-engraved score which is sufficiently complex that it'll have a real-world example of any notational problem you're trying to solve – or, an example of something that can serve as an analogy. The score I always recommend is the 1967 *Rite of Spring*, and even though Clint Nieweg has found more errors in it than grains of sand on Bondi Beach – and Manly Beach – and Dromana – it's still I think an exemplary piece of engraving and a really beautiful graphic object in its own right. Now a composer can get hold of a copy of that pretty easily but obtaining an orchestra part without theft being involved is a wee bit more tricky. So I give them a copy of the violin I part to Mahler 1 (the UE edition, I think it's probably reprinted by Luck's). And it's a copy of a played part so they can see how players mark them up. I use this because I happen to think it's a really good example of a beautifully engraved part. It's very tightly spaced, the cues are helpful and not excessive, it has reasonably complex divisi which are rendered impeccably legible for the player, and there are lots of things where you can point out 'this is a good way to solve this particular problem'.

To get back to the thing about spacing, though – and this gets back to composers not playing in orchestras and not regularly looking at parts – I think when the computer spits out this part with vastly generous amounts of white space, the composer thinks this is good (a) because they're not used to anything else and (b) because there's lots of space for the players to write bowings and fingerings and whatnot. It's counter-intuitive to them that this isn't necessarily a good thing. I mean their parts don't need to be spaced as tightly as Mahler but the defaults in the software always need some attention. I always tell composers that if they want to improve their parts, they should try to reproduce a few pages of that Mahler 1 part. To the best of my knowledge none of them ever has. But I still think it's good advice. Because if you're reproducing something that's really well done, you get a sense of what the players like to see.

### Notational trendiness

One of my rules is, don't make up your own notation. There's almost always a conventional way to write it: someone else has almost always got there first. This is where our experience can be really helpful for composers. We see so many scores that we can say, here's a piece that the orchestra has played recently, that seems to be the same sort of thing you're after, what about that?

But we can also suggest ways that the composers can express what they want in more conventional terms. I had one – and I'm going to simplify this somewhat – who had a squiggly line where  meant fast vibrato, and  meant slow vibrato. OK, so far so good. The squiggly line was preceded by one of four symbols which bore no relationship to Western musical notation. They looked like something that came out of electrical engineering. Anyway the first symbol meant, vibrato from the starting note up to a

quarter-tone higher. The second symbol meant, vibrato from the starting note up to a quarter-tone lower. The third symbol ... and I'm already getting weary thinking about this ... the third symbol was vibrato a full semitone higher, and the fourth was a full semitone higher or lower. There was a paragraph of about 100 words to explain all this.

So I said, OK, well why don't we keep the squiggly line, because that was a graphic that was pretty clear. The hundred-word paragraph included instructions of how to determine the speed, which were less brief than they needed to be, and I suggested replacing this by just writing 'fast' here  and 'slow' here , at the first appearance of the squiggly line. Then I said, well, there's a trill notation where we have the starting note followed by a note in brackets to indicate the trilling note. Why don't we borrow that, and have the note to which the vibrato should go, in brackets. So then the player only has to learn one thing – that the squiggly line means vibrato and the  means speed. And you can put that at the first appearance of the squiggly line and the player will remember it from then on. This is because you're using something which is close enough to normal notation that the player can easily learn it – but, it is dissimilar enough to conventional notation that the player won't get confused between it and another effect.

When I'm talking about finding analogies to one's notational problems in a visual thesaurus, by the way, that's the sort of thing I mean.

The other thing about this bloke was that there was a foreword of about five pages before each of the parts which explained all this notation. We got the piece to the point where the symbol for each new effect could be explained in the score – and the part – with a footnote, at the point where it first appeared. Which is what the players prefer; they don't want to have to bookmark the preface to go back and remind themselves of what this notation means. I mean if you're reading *War and Peace* and you have to keep a thumb in the character list for the first hundred pages until you're familiar with who's who, well that's fine but if you're playing an eight-and-a-half minute piece for chamber orchestra then it's a bit much. Of course some notation is genuinely so complex and so knitted into the fabric of the work that a brief note before the music is the best option. I'm thinking here of things like Adès's 2/6 time signatures. But really, it can almost always be avoided.

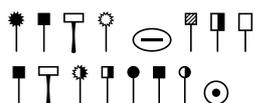
A slight extension of 'don't make up your own notation' is that I'd also avoid using notation which can theoretically be described as conventional, inasmuch as it hasn't been invented by the composer, but for which a clearer system exists. For instance, this notation for quarter-tones:



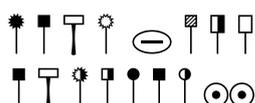
I mean, I didn't make these up, but realistically you need a footnote to explain them. So, use what Gould suggests in *Behind Bars*:



Similarly, these Ghent ideograms for percussion:



Seriously, nobody knows what these mean. I mean what's the first one, Bart Simpson seen from above? What's the last one – play with an expression of surprise?



The point to make to composers is that if you want the musician to use a yarn mallet – although we'll talk about percussion mallets in a moment – it's easiest to just write 'yarn mallet' because the musician can read the words 'yarn mallet' and know that the composer intends them to play with a yarn mallet, rather than obliging the musician to decode symbols which look extremely hip and funky, but are about as useful as Akkadian cuneiform.

The classic example for unnecessarily groovy notation is the time signatures that Orff uses in *Carmina burana*.



When you get a score with these things in it, what you do is this. You go to the files, and you pull out the bowings for *Carmina*, and you show the composer how the players have changed every single time signature to a conventional time signature, so they can read the music. And you ask: when you listen to *Carmina Bananas*, can you tell that it is written with groovy time signatures? No? Then what's the point? Notation is practical. Practical, practical, practical. It is not a vehicle for expressing one's coolness. It's a vehicle for translating something written into sound. It needs to do that as efficiently as possible.

#### Pretentious performance directions

As well as pretentious notation it is also worth keeping an eye out for pretentious performance directions. This can be a bit of a fine line to tread; you certainly don't want to discourage the composer from quickly giving a sense of the mood they're trying to create. But although musicians may find it useful or interesting to have an idea of the composer's extramusical thoughts, the degree to which they do depends very much on the individual musician. And it's of secondary importance. Really the musicians need to know six things: how fast; how slow; how loud; how soft; how short; how long. All else is detail.

We had a composer recently who wrote performance directions – and I'm paraphrasing here, but it was like – 'With a sense of longing for the ocean'. I said, how do you play the trombone in a way that is longing for the ocean? Do you stop and put down the instrument from time to time and say 'Geez, I'm up for a surf'? I had one who gave the tempo indication 'Lent'. He

was not of French heritage. I think his name was Kevin. (Or perhaps it should have been pronounced something like *que-vin*.) How do you play slowly in a distinctively French way? Do you wear a beret? So you want to help the composer not look frivolous in front of the orchestra. Sometimes though they insist. We had one in a postgrad workshop at Melbourne University who wrote in the timpani part the deathless performance instruction ‘Pound the crap out of them’. I framed the part and gave it to the timpanist with a note of admiration.

The point is of course that performance directions can carry only so much interpretive weight; the music has to convey its own meaning. The audience sitting in the hall should be longing for the ocean. Whether or not the trombone player is thinking of Palm Beach is neither here nor there.

### Rhythm

The other thing which I’m seeing a lot recently is rhythm. I don’t mean weirdo time signatures or unnecessarily bizarre tuplets. I don’t even mean additive rhythm, although every time you see a bar of seven or a bar of five, it’s wise to check all the parts to make sure that they’re grouped consistently. And if they haven’t been, then you have to explain why this is necessary. (Again, it gets back to the lack of playing in ensembles; if you’ve ever sat there while everybody wastes time working out whether it’s 3+2 or 2+3, you know that you don’t ever want to do that again.)

No, what I mean is a misspelled bar of 4/4. You’ll see quarter-note, half-note rest, quarter-note. Or a bar of 3/4 which is half-note rest, quarter note. Or a bar of 6/4 which is written as a bar of 12/8, or vice versa. This is partly a proofing issue and it’s not infrequently a software issue; say the composer had initially written quarter-note, half-note, quarter-note, but then decided to delete the half-note, so the software replaces it with a half-note rest because the software is stupid. But that doesn’t excuse the composer from spotting the error or from being ignorant of why it’s an error. Gould explains rhythmic notation with pellucid clarity, and I always point to her.

Beaming is also something which is often worth checking, and also something where Gould is great. So many composers don’t understand that in orchestral parts, beaming is really not helpful for indicating phrasing: it’s a mechanism to show the beat. This is theoretically in 6/4:



One of the few times I’ve seen a musician get really annoyed with a composer, like, steaming, was when a trombonist was presented with bar after bar of this sort of thing:



It went at a fair clip, too, from memory, and the player actually said to the composer ‘You sing that rhythm. Go on, you sing it!’ and of course the poor kid couldn’t. Once we’d beamed it correctly,



it at least could be read. When I did the crit for that one I corrected every bar for the first ten pages or so, at which point I was well bored and wrote ‘I think you get the idea now, up to you.’

So again, some of these things are just typos and some of them are the result of the composer not quite thinking about the musicians. Or, for that matter, not quite thinking about the musical sense. Often they get so close to the piece that they can lose sight of how it will be played, and how it will sound. We had one a few weeks ago where the composer had written a long passage which was a bar of 3/8 followed by a bar of 5/8 followed by a bar of 3/8 followed by a bar of 5/8 ... 3/8, 5/8, 3/8, 5/8, unto the crack of doom, and we said, why not make it either 8/8 or 4/4 but stressed 3+3+2? It would have been indistinguishable to the listener, and it’s not only less fiddly for the players but actually easier, because they can see the groove and they can get into it. It’s a more accurate reflection of the musical sense.

And not dissimilarly there was one which was in 4/4, but almost everything was in triplets:

In my report I said ‘You may want to strangle me ... but this would be clearer as 12/8’. The piece had nothing that couldn’t be respelled as 12/8. The only exception was at the ends of phrases where he’d (in a quarter-note beat) he’d write an eighth-note and an eighth-note rest. I said, you could do that as a duplet but really it was so quick that staying in 12/8 and writing an eighth-note and two eighth-note rests, it was easier and it makes no difference, so that’s what we did.

This is what I mean about using our experience to help the composer. Because we’re looking at music all the time. Even if we’re not looking at it with a composer’s mindset, we know that we never see an entire piece where every beat is a triplet. It obviously hasn’t occurred to the composer that this is odd. But we know that it is, and we can suggest what to do about it.

## Particular instruments<sup>2</sup>

A few things about particular instruments. Of course percussion heads the list because few composers prefer to write for percussion with the economy and, dare I say, the consequent effectiveness of say an Elgar or a Copland. So you often get parts whose composers have apparently assumed that they'll be played by an octopus. As no orchestra has yet employed a cephalopod, or at least none in Australia, it's wise to point out where this is musically and/or contractually impossible. This applies not just to clear-cut examples where they have been contracted for two musicians and they have four discrete instruments playing simultaneously. The issue is also whether there will be enough time to switch instruments. A fast change can be equally as impossible as playing a vibraphone and windmachine at the same time.

The composer may have devised a rostering system and a layout, but it can't be assumed that the musicians will follow this. They may well be able to improve on it; or, depending on how the piece is programmed, it may require too complex a stage move between pieces. The piece never exists in isolation. So the best rule is to write for one instrument per musician at a time and allow plenty of time to change. This is one of those things where you should highlight it but you have to leave it for them to come up with a solution.

I also try to gently dissuade composers from specifying mallets. Because unless it's a special effect, like scraping a tamtam with a triangle beater, the musician is the expert and the musician will always know better than the composer what's going to work. And, again, the piece doesn't exist in isolation. The player for instance may be asked to use a set of so-and-so mallets but if they're already holding a set of such-and-such mallets, and if these work with the instrument, then they'll use those. I suggest composers just indicate the effect they're after (pianissimo, staccatissimo, dolcissimo, whatever) and the musician will do the rest.

It's like bowings. Again, unless it's a special effect like the *Dances of the Young Girls* from *The Rite of Spring* then seriously the players will totally ignore whatever bowings are in the parts, so, you know, save yourself the hassle. At this point it's worth pointing to that Mahler 1 part. It's got the bowings in the ink, and I am not sure if they come from Arnold Rosé or from Mahler himself, but they are what Mahler wrote. And the players ignore them.

The one that for some reason has been coming up a bit lately is composers who put horns 1 and 3 on the top staff, and horns 2 and 4 on the bottom staff. And I realise this has more currency than some other notational eccentricities I've been discussing. But it is a good example of something that seems to make sense at first glance but doesn't really reflect how we work. It's like scores in C; I insist on transposed scores partly because it's an important intellectual discipline to learn how to write them, and partly because they reflect what's in the parts, but mainly because it's what conductors are used to seeing.

So with the horns we really need to give the composer a potted history lesson. We talk about how when they joined the orchestra horns came in pairs, a high one and a low one. And you look at all the Classical repertoire with just two horns. But then when composers started using

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2. Not an exhaustive list.

four horns, they still wrote in pairs, which is why third horn is a high horn. And, in the days when natural instruments were standard, composers would often have each pair in a different key. So horns 1 and 2 might be in E flat and horns 3 and 4 in C. So the composer has at their disposal the harmonic series of E flat and of C, and that means they have more notes to play with. And then you find them a copy of Brahms 2, whose opening features horns in different keys for exactly that reason. And we say that although nowadays of course horns are in F and are fully chromatic, that history is still reflected in how horn players are trained and of course that history is embodied in a huge amount of the music that horn players play.

Much of this is likely to be news to the composer.

We're getting here ever closer to the point: we're talking about how the musicians see it.

★ ★ ★

### 3. DEALING WITH COMPOSERS

And that means that we are talking about how to translate this for the composers.

Everything that I have been talking about is important for the composer on a pragmatic level. Composers understand that they want the rehearsal to go as smoothly as possible, and the less time spent on problems with the parts, the more time spent rehearsing. That's just basic professionalism. But there's a slight distinction between having an accurate set of parts, and having a set of parts which work for musicians, and which are expressed in a notational language as familiar as possible. For many composers this is a genuinely new idea. And it needs to be explained with reasoning, by saying, this is how it works because X, and it needs to be explained with patience – sometimes quite a bit.

Just to illustrate, let's go back for a second to Gould's quarter-tone notation:



There are a few things about this. Obviously it's immediately readable. It's a textbook example of adapting existing notation, like we talked about before. It's functional; you can write quarter-tone runs and you can write enharmonically. But what's really clever is that it reflects how musicians think about quarter-tones. I mean I guess there are people who can precisely pitch A-and-a-quarter flat, who are the human equivalent of a quarter-tone piano. (And a big failing, a massive failing of this system is that it doesn't allow for one-third-tones, for the people who can pitch those too – both of them.) Because I may be wrong, but I suspect that most players don't think like that; they don't think 'this note is exactly F-and-a-quarter sharp', but 'this note is a bit sharp of F natural but not quite as far north as F sharp'. And that mindset is something that's worth the composer understanding.

There's also here a level of – politeness. I mean if you're asking top professionals to work on your music, if you're asking them to take it seriously, it's polite to know as much as possible

about how those top professionals think. Otherwise you're like a tourist who goes to another country without bothering to learn about their customs or language.

So when I'm talking to these composers of up-to-the-minute modern music I use Brahms and Mahler and Stravinsky to illustrate things – in fact, every time I use an existing work to illustrate something, I make a point of finding the oldest example I can. If a composer writes for multiple ensembles, I pull out the St Matthew Passion. The fact that this repertoire is helpful in demonstrating things exposes a much broader point. This is the music that orchestras play. This is the vast majority of what orchestras do. Most of our work is Richard Strauss or earlier. I think it's incredibly valuable for composers to read the Berlioz/Strauss orchestration book. It was published in 1905 and obviously, the instruments of the orchestra have evolved since then. But actually, you know, not that much. And the book gives the composer an insight into the tradition from which the musicians are coming.

It can be argued that it is not the composer's job to fit into a tradition. And sure, that's true. And disregarding or subverting a tradition is a perfectly valid, a meaningful thing to do. But I do think that if you do that without first understanding how that tradition works, it's just an exercise in ignorance and, dare I say, pretension. And nothing on earth is better for instantly detecting ignorance, or pretension, or incompetence, than an orchestra.

I don't give all composers the treatment. Some of them are genuinely eminent and I wouldn't dream of making suggestions. Some of them think they're genuinely eminent and would be gravely offended if I made suggestions. Some are writing music where really most of what I've been talking about is just not relevant. If you're a disciple of Ferneyhough then the beaming of the sixteenth-notes is the least of the musicians' worries.

But otherwise I do think that composers can get a lot of benefit from a critical eye going over their score. Venus Williams has a coach and if it's good enough for her then it's good enough for a young composer. And after all, if that composer had decided instead to be an author, and had written a book, there is no way it would be published without input from an editor. Sometimes considerable input. I can only think of one great composer who had that sort of thing in a systematic way, and that was Elgar, with his great friend August Jaeger. Having an editor isn't really part of the culture in compositional circles and I think that's a pity. I think there are far too many pieces which would have been stronger if they'd had more help.

The reaction from composers does vary. Some are incredibly grateful and take the advice seriously, and that's very gratifying. Some composers will thank you very fulsomely and then ignore everything you've written, and you just think, oh well. Some don't take it very well and you get a sort of ominous silence. And while one's always sorry to upset people, and while it's annoying to do the work for nothing, you sort of have to let it slide. The composer's prerogative to ignore advice doesn't change the truth of it.

And the advice is pretty much always echoed by the orchestra. We had a Fifty Fanfares composer this year who'd written phrases where rather than write a pair of sixteenth-notes, they'd written eighth-notes with a single measured tremolo slash:



And I said, look, if it's a long string of a regular pattern then that's OK,



but because these ones are irregular they should be written out in full:



Particularly things like this



where I think you mean this:



And I quoted the first two *Sea-Interludes from Peter Grimes*, where Britten writes with and without the slash notation and it's perfectly clear. In the *Dawn Interlude*, the arpeggios in the strings are all slashed but in *Sunday Morning*, it's all written out. (Including one figure identical to the last one I've just quoted from this composer.) Well, the composer didn't want to do it, partly because it would have been a fair amount of rewriting, but partly because I just couldn't convince them that it was necessary.

They were convinced after the workshop. The orchestra wasn't unpleasant, not at all. I mean, I have only very very rarely known an orchestra to be anything other than scrupulously polite and kind to composers. (Mr. Pound-the-crap-out-of-them did push them a bit.) But in that rehearsal, that point – and others I had made – kept coming up over and over again. The composer got the message.

Giving feedback can be tricky, particularly when you're suggesting large-scale alterations. But I think there are three things that one should bear in mind.

Firstly you have got to be honest. You have to say, the players will react this way to this thing you've written. This is difficult to read. This cannot be played.

But secondly, you have to depersonalise what you write, and this is always about explaining why you're telling them this. The players will react this way: because the notation is not standard and learning new symbols slows the reading process. This is difficult to read: because the beaming doesn't break at the quarter-note beat and so it obscures the rhythmic structure of the bar. This cannot be played: because the lowest string of the viola is the C an octave below middle C.

And the third thing to always keep in mind is that we are trying to make the piece better. We are trying to help the composer realise their vision. We want the musicians to concentrate on playing the music, not deciphering it. Because that is the only way that they can appreciate the piece as music. They may not like it. That may well be a fair reaction. The piece might be rubbish. But we owe it to the composer to give the piece the best chance of an assessment on its merits.

Don't worry, by the way, if you feel that you have a bit of impostor syndrome going on. I am second-guessing myself all the time when I'm writing these reports. And I'm very very conscious that there's a lot that I don't have the expertise to critique. That's fine. Everything I'm telling them, everything you're going to be telling them, is based in practical knowledge and experience. Not just of living with orchestral parts day in day out but from being in rehearsals day in day out. That's something that these composers don't have. Seriously, any help we can give them is going to be good for that piece and it's going to be good for pieces they write in the future.

Which is really important. Because new music has huge challenges to overcome in this business. It's expensive, it's commercially risky, it gets audiences saying 'Ooh, Beryl, I really don't like this dreadful modern music, I really prefer Brahms', you know what I mean. But in fact the first audience for a piece isn't the people sitting in the hall. It's the musicians on the stage. They are the first people the composer has to reach. And I think if the musicians believe in the piece then that does come across the footlights.

And of course when you have a really fantastic piece by a composer who knows their stuff then it's not so much that that makes it all worthwhile – although it does – it's that it's a privilege to help. Last year I was asking one of our musicians for advice on something I was going to tell a composer. She confirmed that I was on the right track and added 'A composer who has got it right is [and she named the Fifty Fanfares composer whose piece was being played that week] who is being applauded spontaneously by the orchestra at the end of each performance.' That is what we want.

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